

From
A
Western
Hilltop

STANTON A. CORLENTZ



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FROM A WESTERN HILLTOP

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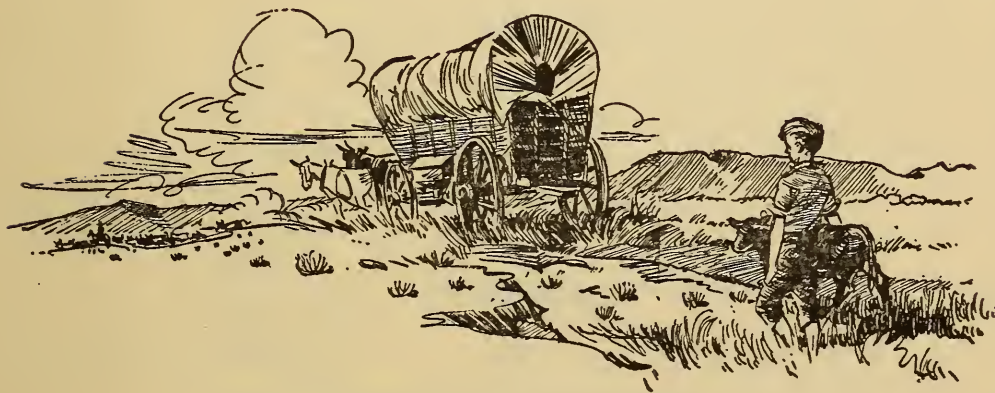
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ANTHOLOGIES

Unseen Wings
The Music Makers
Modern American Lyrics
Modern British Lyrics

From
A Western Hilltop



by

STANTON A. COBLENTZ

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The poems in this collection have appeared in the following periodicals, to the editors of which the author desires to express his thanks for permission to reprint:

Canadian Poetry Magazine, Catholic World, Christian Century, Christian Science Monitor, Denver Post, Different, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Florida Magazine of Verse, Improvement Era, Kaleidograph, Living Wilderness, Lyric, Music Journal, New York Herald-Tribune, New York Times, Personalist, Poetry Digest, Poet Lore, Poetry Review (London), Prairie Schooner, Talaria, Washington Star, and Weird Tales.

I

The Living World

The Saga of Life

I

Not the great suns that wheel in fiery space
Nor atoms with flame-demons at their core,
Nor peak nor desert nor the foam-lapped shore
Shall matter at the final reckoning-place.
But life, fierce eager life, which shows its face
In the green steppe and ocean's shelly floor,
Life that may groan or carol, grope or soar,
Burrow or weave, build bridges, squirm or race,

Life in the antlered stag big-eyed with fear,
Life in the sidling crawler of the sand,
Life in the fern, the thistle, and the grass,
Life in the bee, the moth, the redwood spear, —
This, and this only, shows a Purpose planned
For which the systems roll and ages pass.

II

Always a pulse within me strangely stirs
At sight of dark eyes peering from a wood,
A lift of joy, a flash of brotherhood
At oaks with comradely arms, and blowing firs,
A kinship where the small field-creature whirrs;
And all the passion and pang, half understood,
That makes the world anxious and keen and good
Where the hawk circles or the kitten purrs.

I throb with the deep turmoil and delight,
The thrusting, seeking, craving, pain and dread
Marking the beat of bat-wings in the night,
The track of wolves, or one lone sparrow dead.
A snail-shell emptied, a feather's drifting white
May hint of worlds uncharted, epics unsaid.

The Green Earth

I

WOOD AISLES

The silence lies along these tawny lanes
So deeply one could almost touch its hem,
Where light in dusky bronze and amber stains
Filters through leaf and stem.

The silence drifts in crystalline repose,
Calm as clear water glimmering over glass,
Wherein the world, its furies and its woes
Are less than gnats that pass.

And strangely, all the low continual din
Of insects whirring and of jays that call,
Seems part of that great speechlessness within
The ferned and templed hall.

Silence has many tongues, for many moods,
And yet from none a purer eloquence rings
Than when, in chambered noonday solitudes,
An unheard music sings.

II

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPEECHLESS

Only in drowsy woods and dreaming midnights,
In haunted deserts, dunes and stars and peaks,
Only in bald plateaux, and cliffs, and canyons,
The language of the speechless clearly speaks.

Something it is no city ever harkened,
Something no clattering stranger ever heard,
Dear to the hermit and the trail-worn climber,
Loved of the fox and doe and nesting bird.

But in the moon, witch-eyed above the forest,
And in the mountain's beaked and glacial limb,
It murmurs; and the listening spirit knows it,
Sweeter than music of the seraphim.

It tells of height, and distances, and wonder,
Beauty beyond our sense-bound towers and peaks.
Only in bald plateaux, and cliffs, and canyons,
The language of the speechless clearly speaks.

III

FOREST VOICES

And do the woods not sigh in weariness,
Nor murmur with impatience at the hours,
When dozing summer smooths each green-lit tress
Or frosty-ribboned winter weeps and lowers?

And do they never mourn that days are long,
Nor chaff at winds' and rains' monotony,
Hearing the same wild stormy-throated song
Timelessly hymned from tree to quivering tree?

And do they never feel the rush of hope,
Nor the sky-ripping lightning shoot of fear, —
Tight-knitted to some old brown leafy slope
Where even the streams are changeless, year on year?

Immobile in a sleep beyond our knowing,
Dreaming mute dreams unfathomable to man,
They stand like truth; while we, like ripples flowing,
May wonder which is first in nature's plan.

IV

REDWOODS

Seeing these towers sloping to the sky
With steepled peaks and short down-slanting limbs,
I seem to feel the mighty interims
Of ages long gone by.

Can these be daughters of our living earth,
These congregations so immensely massed,
Or remnant of some green and spacious past,
Ere mouse or man had birth?

They who had conference with Titan forms,
Scale-clad beneath the bright Jurassic sun,
Who knew the sabre-tooth and mastodon,
And continent-shaking storms, —

Surely they've earned the right to dream and brood
In canyons scornful of our prattling throng,
Their tranquil reminiscence like a song
Hymned to the solitude.

V

MONTEREY CYPRESSES

Like weird fantastic wrestlers, petrified
In witches' writhings, with contorted limbs
Twisted as though in tune to wild men's hymns,
They sprawl along the surf-edged mountainside.
And ageless agony and tortured pride
Shriek from the green of each wind-ravelled tress,
Where, persecuted by the gale, they press
With seamed, dark boles the centuries gnarled and tried.

If we could watch a hundred years drive past,
Shrunk to a moment, every bough and root,
In mad encounter, would grapple, toss and fly
Like sea-waves weltering in the squally vast;
Each torn old pillar, like a scarred recruit,
Daring the arrowy Huns of earth and sky.

VI

ROOTS

Sunlight and breeze may bless the leaf and flower,
But these dark burrowing things that claw the earth
Are servants of the great primeval power
That gave the forest birth.

With marvelous fingers intricately weaving,
Timed to the seasons' never-failing clock,
They seem to know, by some innate perceiving,
The ways of damp and rock.

Gnarled with the strength that lifts the oak and laurel,
Nursed by the cool earth-breast as though in love,
They labor like the undetected coral
That rears the isle above.

Well may the world acclaim, in lilting phrases,
The spangled blossom and the purple fruit.
But let me place my wreath where no man gazes, —
Low on the mothering root.

VII

NEGLECTED PATH

In one short year, the path was overgrown.
Where but last summer we were rambling free,
Blue thistles barred our way, a storm had thrown
The tangled wreckage of a laurel tree.
Blackberry creepers scratched us, tall wild broom
Elbowed its legions round a slit of trail;
Wild rose and honeysuckle fought for room
On highways of the lizard, snake and snail.

And though by weaving, dodging, stooping low
We clove an exit to the lane ahead
Through briar and poison oak, we seemed to know
In every bud and branch a voice that said
How frail man's lease; how soon, when he is gone,
The world returns to tendril, leaf and thorn.

VIII

FUNGI

Like weeds conceived in some weird opium dream
Or fetid growths spawned in the swamps of hell,
They haunt the damp and darkness, lords supreme
Where none beside can dwell.

Dust-gray or spotted, pestilent blue or black,
With furred excrescences or spidery thread,
They drain sly ghoulish banquets, and attack
The sepulchres of the dead.

On rotting logs and house-beams, grain and cloth,
And foul things hidden in the humid gloom,
They plant their petalless gardens, and bring forth
A pale, malefic bloom.

Daughters of earth no less than ferns and roses!
Even through them the great world-spirit peers!
The mould, that feeds upon decay, reposes
In the hand that turns the spheres.

IX

FOREST SIGHT

This oak-tree sprouting from the mouldering bole
Of a felled redwood, rises shoulder-high.
Thus, amid death, life's everlasting soul
Flaunts her green heritage that cannot die.

X

WATERFALL

Crowned by the crashing of the waterfall,
White shattering thunder-bursts that never cease,
A wonder haunts the piny canyon hall, —
Tumult and power, and the heart of peace.

XI

OVERTONES

I who have roamed this land for loving years
And know each grotto like my cottage door,
Have found there's not a path I may explore
That stretches twice the same to eyes or ears.
Strange, with an alien grace, this fir appears
That marked my trail a thousand times before;
The old green boulder on the canyon floor
Looms freshly retinued with ferny spears.

And on the peak, the dear familiar stream,
Suddenly, in a new revealing light,
What unsuspected forms and flashes gleam!
Only by gift of many seasons' sight
One fully sees the oak, the finches' flight,
Or penetrates the redwood's noonday dream.

XII

RETURN TO THE WOODS

The bluejays still are mirthful
Deep in the redwood trees,
Beneath whose tossing towers
I lie in drowsy ease;

And at my feet a brooklet,
Crystalline as of old,
Rambles through wood-lanes dappled
With fawn and leafy gold.

But in the white azalea,
Furred moss, and lady-fern,
No word is written of summers
That never shall return;

No word of one who wandered,
Lighter of foot and heart,
Among those groves, with only
Freedom and joy for chart;

No word of time that ages
Muscle and mind and eye,
While over these hills like shadows
The printless years go by.

XIII

CONSOLATION

I went with my grief to the forest,
But the forest was calm and glad.
Never an oak lamented,
Never a fern was sad.

In the misty hush of morning
The laurels, darkly green,
Stared in a priestly silence
Low in the hill-ravine.

And over them all the redwoods
Crowded in shadowy bands
With peaks that tapered and jutted
Like shaggy and pointed hands.

"Peace!" was the song they chorused.
"Peace!" from the moss and stream.
And even the crow on the pine-top
Echoed that placid dream.

I went with my grief to the forest,
And bathed in its harmonies,
And found I had lost my sorrow
In the joy of birds and trees.

XIV

PARADISE GAINED

If I should name the hour when paradise
Seemed closest to my touch, and mirror-plain,
I should recall a looping summer lane
Under the blue of peak-divided skies;
Dark redwood canyons curved beneath my eyes;
On brushy hills the wild broom's saffron stain;
And in my ears, a constant gay refrain,
The whirr and drone of bees and dragonflies;
And heathery scents, and laurel-shadowed streams,
And all the air alive with such delight
I felt like some free spirit treading space;
While capping the glory of that land of dreams,
She whom I love held, like a mountain sprite,
The green world smiling in her upturned face.

Mountain Road

I

The gray paved ribbon spirals, climbs, descends
High over mountainsides of forest green
Where redwoods crowd, the moss-barked oak extends,
And the white river tears the pronged ravine.
Down the macadam strip, with fumes and haste,
Squadrons on wheels go droning, sputtering by,
While ridge on ridge the woody trailless waste
Billows in silence to the voiceless sky.

But man, who roars and passes, has no part
In the wide comradeship of peak and tree.
Only a few will feel strange promptings start,
And pause, and sense an ancient sanctity,
And hazily read, upon a leafy page,
The signature of some lost heritage.

II

Before my gaze, as in a madman's dream,
Bright wheeled projectiles whizz and glitter by,
With groaning of brakes, the windshield's daggered gleam,
The trailer-trucks house-long and cottage-high,
And whirring and lurching roadsters, where the spread
Of purpling orchards, and the lift and curve
Of mountains, canyon wood and dry stream-bed
Are formed, and vanish at a lunge and swerve.

I think how once the ox-drawn rumbling cart
Would bear us forth, or mule or camel-back;
How the lone trudging rover felt a part
Of all he saw, though stooped beneath a pack;
While we, who turn the wizard pages of space,
Leave them unread as onward and on we race.

Bramble Patch

A brambly tangle by the hooting road!
Yet here, as on the larger thoroughfare,
Life hums and rushes; and its agents dare
Peril and death, and lift a staggering load.
Now a striped bee has made her brief abode
In a white blossom-heart; and here and there
One black-and-lemon-waisted zooms in air,
Or spirals — driven by what fierce, dim goad?

And sky-blue midget moths come fluttering down;
And with sails flapping, from a flower-breast,
Great butterflies of bronze or orange-brown;
And tinselled flies, and gnats that never rest,
Lend to each arm-length bramble patch a zest
As of a throbbing, business-crowded town.

Eyes

Where eyes are shining, light must burn within;
Some conscious presence lurks, and peers, and sees:
The strange shortsighted compound eyes of bees,
And frogs' small bulging orbs with glassy grin;
Snake-eyes, their lidless gaze malign as sin;
And jays' bright glittering eyes; and mysteries
Of sharks that stare, and blazing savageries
Of tigers — all unlike, yet all akin.

Where eyes are shining, some beholding mind,
Lit by awareness past our power to guess,
Dwells in the caverned loneliness behind.
And man's own eyes, world-scanning, may express
His nearness to the seeing wilderness,
To wolves and owls, and all perceiving kind.

Little Creatures

I

SEA BIRDS

Only the gray rock-islet splashed with foam
And the cold ocean's heaving and shifting floor
Offer these flocks a resting-place and home,
Timed to the waves' continual wash and roar.

Yet gaily to the cliff the myriads go:
Pelicans in a huge-beaked, flapping line;
Gulls with their dipping curves; and, fathoms below,
Black long-necked things that barely skim the brine.

And legions, bobbing on the billows, ride
Calmly as songsters roosting on a tree.
Water and sky are theirs, and little beside
But life deliriously glad and free.

II

DRAGONFLIES

The dragonflies go whizzing,
Each like a wired machine,
Above the dry hill-thicket
Of spiny brown and green.

Four-winged, and button-headed,
With demon sparks of eyes,
All afternoon, unwearied,
They dip and swerve and rise.

To us a sylphish vision,
But to the circling mite
No tiger, dripping scarlet,
Could be a grislier sight.

III

HONEY BEE

Life without blemish! earth's most blameless daughter!
She culls no tribute from a heart or leaf;
Gathers no shard or bone as wry reporter
Of flower or wing she nipped to withered grief.

All pollen-dusted from gay-tinted faces,
Her banded amber body sloped in flight,
Swinging and dipping over sun-warmed spaces,
She lives on nectar-wine and honeyed light.

And seeing her elfin rush, her winged inspection
That petals the hills with bloom, one might suppose
A thing of flesh clad in the sweet perfection
Of the wild tulip and the fern and rose.

IV

MOTHS

These tissue-fragile nymphs of fluttering gray,
With green in patches only viewed at rest,
Wander in flickering joy like shades astray
Through kingdoms of the blest.

Under the oaks they reel on midget wings
With gay aerial waltzes never done;
Each, like a stemless pair of petals, swings
Into the breeze and sun.

Cloud upon cloud, gently they drift and rise, —
Spawn of a day, in one bright leafy hall
They have attained the peace, the paradise
For which men vainly call.

V

RED MOTH

This big red-bodied moth, with striped gray wings,
And furry head, and swift half-blinded flight,
Spins round my room with drunken flutterings
And whirls against the light.

Then down upon my book, with flapping form,
Courting some end no book has ever given;
And up into the lamp, a dizzy storm
By greedy passions driven.

Then on my sleeve it rests its downy shape,
Till round the blazing globe it beats once more,
As though within the glare it sought escape
To some last fiery shore.

O mad careering spark! I wish you well!
Urged on fierce wings to woo the flame and die, —
Even as we, whom burning dreams impel
None answers where or why.

VI

SNAIL

With pointed horns and soft, up-slanting head,
And domed and mottled shell of yellow gray,
Each second, by the thickness of a thread,
It crawls along its way.

Over a thumb-length cliff, across a stone,
And up a fern-leaf's giant canyon verge,
It travels, patient-moving and alone,
Drawn by what baffling urge?

What is the fire within that slimy shape?
What glint of stray awareness? what the world
That like its shell, is clasped beyond escape
Wherever its form lies curled?

What feelings, what pulsations where it trails
Clock-slow, as by some sure, established plan?
Dark to our minds as even to the snail's
The life and death of man!

VII

THROUGH WILDERNESS EYES

If I, who come of human flesh, am smitten
And shudder at the tramlings of my kind,
At hillocks broken, forests tractor-bitten,
Fires and traps, and guns that maim and blind,
How must the hearts of little people flutter
When from the brush they peep with bright small eyes,
Seeing a goblin armed with power so utter
He comes to wreck the earth and rule the skies?

Could man, with new alchemic vision, peer
Upon his species with the pain-torn sight
Of the hid squirrel on the fleeing deer,
What would he view? No prince whose shining might
Flatters the world, but, loud with obscene revels,
The fiend of fiends, the fierce black king of devils!

VIII

THE GREATER LOVE

And by what gift of sight do we suppose
That in His eyes who curved the dome of space
The thistlebloom is baser than the rose,
Or elk less noble than our own proud race?

To the all-ranging gaze of One above,
The stricken hound, the wounded fox may be
Clasped in the same divine, compassionate love
That pours, unnoted, even on you and me.

The "Seeing Eye"

I cannot drive the picture out of mind:
Upon a clanging, windy thoroughfare
Under a gray brick wall, I saw the pair:
He with the sagging shoulders of the blind
And vacant-gazing face; while, standing by
Like one obedient, never asking why,
His furred companion watched, the "Seeing Eye."

Patiently, clamped in jaws as tight as steel,
She held an old tin cup, which rang at times
With tinkle of pennies and the clink of dimes.
The dust blew past; the din of horn and wheel
Rattled and shrieked; but faithfully as one
Chained to Promethean duties never done,
She waited where there fell no warmth of sun.

And which to pity most I scarcely knew:
The master or the dog, who seemed to speak
From eyes as old as suffering, stony bleak
For fields, and lanes to romp on, dragging through
Long days where footsteps thump and pass and come,
An alien in the traffic's wheeze and hum,
Whose mien was eloquent with martyrdom.

Two Poems On My Dog

I

Her dark eyes stare in grave uncomprehension
Before the mazes of my human speech.
No further are the moon and fourth dimension
From her bewildered reach.

But bright eyes shine when with the old caressing
I take the black furred head in fondling hands.
Then, at the language of love's ancient blessing,
How well she understands!

II

Oh, that the heavy years might fall away
From this old dog that with half-seeing eyes
And droop-tailed form which quite forgets to play,
No longer flashes where the rabbit flies.
Much I would give to conjure forth again
The bright-orbed frolicking friend of seasons gone.
But time, with one command for beasts and men,
Looks never back . . . nor cares for mantles shorn.
Still in the sun for tranquil hours she dozes,
Still guards a bone, or roves the neighboring brush;
And surely never broods while she reposes,
Nor thinks, like me, the thoughts that sear and crush;
But rising, with a paw upturned to shake,
Shares man's content, not his regret or ache.

Kitten

Coy as a princess, with your gold-green eyes,
And every moment graceful as a dance,
Beauty incarnate in a hand-length size,
What is the quick and conscious thing that lies
Behind your clear, soft glance?

Child-like you chase a string, or, wondering, stare
Into my face, as some grave urchin might.
And must I credit what the wise declare,
That you are kin to fanged ones with a lair
Deep in the jungle night?

And are you of a sly, mysterious breed,
Sphinx-like . . . immured from man . . . weird worlds apart?
I only know that in those eyes I read
Awareness; in your white furred form I heed
The small, swift-beating heart;

And feel your clutch of hunger and alarm,
And feel the laughter in your frolicking glee,
And feel life's drive and lift, a guardian arm
That bids you throb at life's old wizard charm,
Like all that breathe and see!

From a Western Hilltop

I

If ever a fairer sight shall charm my eyes
Than dappled rose-and-gray of twilight skies
Over the long hill-forests of the west,
With lakes of blue above each ragged crest,
I'll know that I have come to paradise.

A pure clear emanation, like a soul
Wreathed in some vast celestial aureole,
Has bathed the enchanted peaks, the clouds, the air,
Till, in a breathless pause, I am aware
Of light and loveliness that link the whole.

The splendor dwindles, and the stars increase;
But I am spellbound, while the colors cease,
As though beyond our reach, beyond our seeing,
The meditations of some master being
Had flooded all the world with love and peace.

II

For years I've watched the mountain, moss-green against the
west,
With bold, long Atlas shoulders, and pointed stony crest;
Its twisted streaks of canyons shaggy with redwood trees,
And crags from which the climber may scan infinities.

I've seen it wear the fog-hood as a masquer wears a gown,
Dusted with blue wild-lilac, or red in a sunset crown.
I've seen the storm-pack billow around it in slate and snow,
And known it a ghostly mountain in the new moon's ghostly
glow.

And always I've felt a presence peer from the ridge and peak,
Wrapped in a passionless quiet that eerily seems to speak,
A silence as old as starlight, when in the tangly vast
Today and tomorrow mingle, the Now and the termless past.

Sealed in a dream of ages, it looks on the shifting range,
The saurian and the mammoth, while forests and rivers
change.
And smiling through its slumber, it sees about its base
In mothering calm the towers of one more gnat-like race.

III

Our mountain's lower spaces, after dark,
Blink from a thousand eyes of house and street.
But high above, with not one lantern spark,
The huge bare slopes and empty heaven meet.

Vast-shouldered, black as on creation day,
Stark peaks are silhouetted overhead,
As if to tell of fireless night that lay
Millions of years, where never a tent was spread.

Never a tent! and scarcely a passing flame
Save for the stars and meteors' demon brood.
One little century since, the rover came
Into a blank, unkindled solitude.

And shall the mountain not, though ages go,
Again be lampless, dark from crown to base?
The firefly winks and flickers out: its glow
Makes little change on night's perennial face.

IV

Smoke-like against the dark the vapors rest,
In curls and spirals round the long rock-cone.
And I who watch see not the peak alone,
Ridges and sky, but language unexpressed
Transfusing all with some inaudible tone.

I feel a strangeness in the summits spread
Like shadows to the huge encroaching night;
Profundities as of things recondite
Tinging the hueless mist, the valley bed
Mistily gray with the last ghost of night.

I feel aloneness where forsaken space
Is wistful with a grief I cannot guess;
And wonder, where the wide dim wilderness
Lifts to the studded vast a worshipful face,
And silence clothes it like a priestly dress.

The sense of mysteries unfathomed, clasped
By woods and ranges, where the cloud-floats stream,
Pervades the twilight in a brooding dream,
As though, like us, the pinnacles had grasped
At the fogged meaning of the whole world-scheme.

Skyscapes

I

Bright in the sunset round the mountain's face,
The clouds revealed a burning Cyclops eye;
Then red flamingo flocks went floating by,
Voyaging over purple-banded space;
Vermilion cliffs, such as a Martian race
From wild pink-weeded mesas might descry;
And ruby islands drifting down the sky,
With capes and rivers slowly changing place;
Apollo heads, and dragons; wisps of fire
Signalling like a lanterned L or J;
And flame-peaks flushed like some Andean spire
That turned to radiant snow, and then to gray —
Art beyond canvas, grace beyond desire.
Lost in the timeless Painter's sky-display.

II

Of all the million million sunsets known
Throughout the years on every land and sea,
Never another sky-display has shown
Tonight's precise gold-purple pageantry:
A fading rainbow whose rich molten hues
Turn to a fuschia column, lemon-rimmed;
While, high above, ruby and rose-light fuse
With wine and gold, where clouds are giant-limbed.

All spellbound as the vistas of a dream,
The gay-pigmented heaven, plains and hills —
A clarity and light that make it seem
Some cosmic Artist moves beyond, and spills
A radiance not of time nor earthly place,
Mixing his colors at that ceaseless spring
Which tints the pansy and the sun in space,
Blue eyes, peach petals, and the oriole's wing.

III

Weird as the scenery of a star in space,
Where belted planets range the violet night,
The moon amid a mist of tawny light,
Cloud-pillowed and with pale cloud-banded face,
Glowed witch-like through her veils of vapory lace,
Which turned from specter-dim to lantern-bright;
While sloping underneath, bare height on height,
The mountains made a half-lit, satiny base.

Like one who hears some vast symphonic tune
Played by a heavenly orchestra, I gazed,
Spellbound by that celestial phantom-show,
Since what I saw was more than cloud or moon;
For one transfiguring moment I was raised
To see incarnate beauty born below.

IV

The cloud-peak white and luminous in the west,
With snowy buttresses and glacial crest,
Looms not of mist, but solid to my eyes
As some almighty, towered Everest.

And since it so deludes me, must I deem
Real Everests the ice and rock they seem,
Or only cloud-peaks shifting, where a mask
Blurs the clear contours of the whole world-scheme?

V

How swiftly, when we watch the drifting cloud,
A wolf or dragon will replace a swan!
How soon an old man's image, hunched and bowed,
Is turned into an infant newly born!

Carved of the mother substance of the fog,
As from a common matrix may be made
Roses and rags; a skylark and a log;
Mud; and the stars above a lover's glade.

VI

The ribbed gray morning clouds were weirdly rifted
Above the eastern hills with lines of flame,
From which a pallid-golden radiance sifted
With long, earth-seeking aim.

Speared with diverging light, like glory beaming
Down from a high cathedral nave, it sank
Out of a muffled sun, a luminance streaming
In shafted rank on rank.

Briefly, as from a throne of things immortal,
Those giant pillars pierced the roof of dawn;
Swiftly as closing of a secret portal,
They dwindled, and were gone.

And I who, dream-bemused, turned homeward slowly,
Walked with a sense, I could not reason why,
Of glints from godlier regions, something holy
Seen through a crack of sky.

II

Beyond Today

Super-Atomic

I

This race of man that slew its human prey
On Aztec altars and in Mayan wells,
And with a bloody reek more fierce than hell's
Turned its skull-piling Timurs forth to slay;
This race that heard the screams, but yesterday,
Of martyrs blazing, and the moans and yells
Of massacred babes in sword-torn citadels;
And taught its sons to rack, impale and flay;
This race that, in its ancient lettered heart,
Built the squat-towered extermination camp,
And from the sky set wharves and schools afire,
Now spawns new furies by terror's latest art;
Though, just behind, old wolfish hordes still tramp,
And smoke wreathes cloudward from the scarlet pyre.

II

When the first skin-clad warrior wove a snare
Of spears or blowguns; when the howling horde
Of the first raiders charged with fire or sword,
The path was opened to the atom-flare.
And Caesar, Cyrus, Alaric helped prepare;
And every Hector, every mail-clad lord
Deepened the breach through which at last there poured
The doom that makes us quail, and shriek, "Beware!"

If some high witness, with a cosmic view,
Could watch our world, and mark our shuddery plight
As fruit of man's old arrowed hate of man,
Perhaps he'd say, "This tribe but reaps its due,
And shall not lose the nemesis of its night
Till all earth's clans feel love for every clan."

III

How many times must fumbling man repeat
The ancient error? Lord, how many times
The scarlet regiments and sabred crimes,
The blistering triumph that precedes defeat?
How many a city scorched and scarred retreat
In lands where terror, like a smoke-wreath, climbs?
Gaunt fugitives that foreign grist begrimes, —
The broken farm and grove, the splintered fleet?
Man's past cries out — the wars of Greece and Troy;
Rome, and the hosts of Hannibal at her gate;
Philip and Peter; Frederick; Charles the Great,
Cromwell and Bonaparte — they never cloy,
The Vandal voices clamoring, "Kill! Destroy!"
While man, the hunted, dies of man's own hate.

IV

Viewed in the spreading vistas of the years —
Not one or fifty, but five hundred score —
All that we are, and all men were before,
Shall look as sea-foam from a peak appears.
Tojos and Hitlers, swung in clawed careers,
And nations cowed in smoke and smeared with gore,
Shall be mere flickers on the waves, their roar
Like far wind-murmurs lost on listening ears.

In those immense perspectives, there shall shine
Not kings or empires, but some blazing trend:
How one world-system sagged to slow decline,
Or how men saw a bright new god ascend,
And, bowed before some great Redeemer's shrine,
Joined hands, and bade the red Destroyer end.

V

So short their sessions in life's afterview —
 Tilly and Jenghis Khan and Bonaparte! —
 For what did they gouge out a planet's heart,
 And make of gore their faith and revenue?
 Their days how flame-shot, but their years how few!
 Triumphs no more than one pale flickering dart
 That left a blur, a smudge upon the chart
 Of ages, then like comet-fire withdrew!

So short their sessions! Though beholding eyes
 Saw them as cyclone, avalanche and flood,
 Yet to a watcher from star-littered skies
 Their trails were but a meteor splash of blood;
 Within time's thousand-centuried surmise,
 One rose-leaf mildewed, one worm-blackened bud.

VI

Sometimes, in sorrow for our burdened age,
 Its writhing nations and ensanguined clans,
 I wonder if the eye of history scans
 A darker pageant than our own scarred page.
 And then I stare at many a vanished stage,
 Caligulas and Neros, and the plans
 Of some intelligence more malign than man's
 For witch-hunts, heretic bonfires, and the rage
 Of torture, massacre and loot, the scourge
 Of slavers, and the despot's club and knout.
 And, by the red flare of the ravaged past,
 I see a brighter-hued today emerge,
 And feel again the invincible hope leap out
 For peaks man's sinuous trail shall mount at last.

Quatrains of A Warring World

I

The things he makes — the motors, guns and snares —
Arm man to vanquish tigers, wolves and bears,
Who, when the atom's walled-up power wakes,
May find their vengeance: in the things he makes.

II

With sword and fire of old man fought the beast,
Till lions perished, and the wolf-howl ceased.
With sword and fire, upon the ancient plan,
Man still goes forth; but now the prey is man.

III

Yes! we are puppets pulled by fingering fate.
But not some shadowy *kismet* guards the gate.
Not fire nor steel nor flood nor thunderstorm
But man's own character lies poised in wait.

Historical Episode

Shadowed by terror, whipped by squalls of hate,
Men sought to make their house secure as steel.
They piled huge mortars high, and laid the keel
Of many a ship to bear a deathly freight.
They scattered warplanes, like the wings of fate,
Across all skies; and bade fleet squadrons wheel
In starched review; and with an iron seal
Stamped the prescriptions of the Law and State.

Rockets outracing sound, and atom fire,
Gases and rays of black omnipotence,
Mountains of ore and oil-lakes fed the Plan.
But in the rage of fear and cross-desire,
Always they missed the one most sure defense:
The might that built all towers, the mind of man.

Ode On The Machine

Its triumph stands assured. On peak and plain,
Ocean and shore, no arm can check its reign . . .
Until the earth, when fire and bomb careen,
Is made machineless by the god Machine.

Man

The vulture can outsee him, and the deer
Outpace him, and the hound has powers of smell
That humble his feeble best; the fox can hear
More keenly, and the swan and goose excel
His homing instinct; boars have stouter hide,
And rats more capable teeth; hornets and bees
Grow sharper weapons; apes and squirrels glide
Up high green galleries with a nimbler ease.

Yes! but to compensate these lacks, we say,
Man has a brain, by which to rule and soar.
And thus he conquers, charts the Milky Way,
Reckons the ages, weighs the proton's core . . .
Then, by his skill, his brilliance in deduction,
He patterns bombs, and plans his own destruction.

Refugees

Droop-necked and ashen-lipped, I see them pass
Where hamlets burn like brands, and fields lie bare:
Women with babes, stumbling in sick despair,
And pit-eyed men who grub for roots and grass.
Above, in meteor streaks, the planes harass;
Beyond, their comrades, panting and straggling, stare
From skull-marked faces; while like nags, they share
Dark bundles, hunched beneath the skies of brass.

These are the saddest casualties — these meek
Uncounted fugitives from the tanks and guns,
Uprooted like weeds, scattered like dust or foam.
O Spirit of Love, preserver of the weak,
Bend down and bless these hungering, weary ones,
Who like new groping Ishmaels, bleed and roam.

Children of Earth

Though their own fingers weave the meshes whereon they
trip,
Though their own hands have poured the poison brew they
drink,
Pity them, Lord of Worlds! the hosts that reel and slip,
Waver and grope and rise, near a vertiginous brink.

Blindly, like children lost, blown in the dark, they strayed;
Hotly their tears have fallen for gates they'll pass no more.
Pity them, Lord of Worlds! In that long promenade
Are all the daughters and sons that mother ever bore.

In A Troubled World

Vainly we crave for some divine Redeemer,
Not knowing one who beats with bleeding wings
At doors whence Man and Sage and Man the Dreamer
Were driven by the reign of Force and Things.

As I Have Looked On Men

As I have looked on men, how few, how few
Remained untarnished by the brush of years!
Some, in the clash and grind of life-careers,
Lost their young vision of the Just and True.
Some, for the garlands that the gallery threw,
Bowed in the dust; or with the market smears
Smudging their brows, or frozen by doubts or fears,
Or mired in self until the world withdrew,
Were all befouled or twisted. Callous time,
Which makes the frolicking girl a sour-eyed crone,
And a wry dotard of the shouting boy,
How shall we halt, and how forgive the crime?
The child-like simple and the great alone
Have armor that no decades can destroy.

The Elusive Goddess

Who looks for happiness will never find,
For he that courts it dreams of self alone,
Lost on the salt-flats of the loveless mind,
Where the blue lamp he longs for never shone.

Slum District

This is the pestilence grown in our own mind,
This street of blank old houses, squalid shops.
Out of man's vision are man's works designed,
And having sown the seed we reap the crops.

Here, where the dirt is swirled in choking clouds
And dusty windows glower, several-tiered,
We glimpse the plan we patterned; and the crowds
Of soiled gray wanderers are the sons we reared.

Here, where the air is acrid, and the eyes
See only wood and asphalt, brick and steam,
Man, whose immortal moods bring paradise,
Garners the fruitage of the worldling's dream.

Alcatraz

Set like a shrine between the Golden Gate
And the long sunrise ranges, where the bay
Reaches in jade and azure leagues away
To citied hills and the wide western strait,
Here is a place where man might contemplate,
And kneeling before the thousand-toned display
Of cloud and billow, peak and forest, pray
To powers above our gods of clash-and-hate.

Yet here man hewed a prison, bluntly cut
As some great battleship, where furtive eyes
Peer out at cell-bars and shadowed sun.
Here sentries pace, and iron doors slam shut,
And night resounds with mutterings and cries,
And purgatorial pain is never done.

The Common People

With bended backs, bowed by the scourge and rod,
They built the Pyramids; their shoulders bore
Stone for the temples of a Mayan god,
And, beaten, heaved beneath a Tyrean oar.
The marble shrines of Athens, pillared Rome,
Byzantium's turrets, Babylon's burnt clay,
Alhambra's arches and Saint Peter's dome,
Brick by hard brick they piled, then went their way.

And the furred trapper's cabin, China's wall,
Venetian bell-towers, silver mines of Greece,
Pagodas, and the mailed baronial hall,
Their slow hands made, with toil that could not cease.
These, while despised, with sneers of "Vulgar birth!",
Reared huts and palaces, and shaped the earth.

Immensities

Fly to Altair or Vega, and you'll find
Iron and ice and flame are just as here,
For distance is a tapestry of the mind,
And all the far is wrapped within the near.
Dive through the centuries to Rome or Troy,
And dawn still reddens at the eastern gate,
Stars burn, and midges wheel in sunlit joy,
For time's a wall our fluctuant lives create.

But search a neighbor's heart; try to explore
The moods that launch his shafts of love or rage,
And mystery wider than Orion's shore
And older than the club-and-arrow age,
Will loom enormous, with a darker face
Than Cambrian seasons or sidereal space.

Beyond Today

Man may be fickle, but the stars still keep
Their punctual appointments high in space.
Not by a thimble's length the planets creep,
Age after age, from their pre-reckoned place.

And contemplating this, I am consoled
For life as turbulent as the gale or spray:
That order, vastly patterned and controlled,
Moves like the stars beyond our torn today.

Crusader

Not for his crown of friends did time revere him,
But that with lancing words and daggered blows
He made the traitor quail, the plunderer fear him,
And gathered round his head a ring of foes.

Quatrains on the Past

I

Seek not to flee the past. With soundless pace,
Held by invisible strings, it will pursue.
Many a man, out of tomorrow's face,
Has seen stark yesterday return to view.

II

A bottomless waste-heap, murky with men's ills,
Shipwreck and tempest, ruin, strife and wrong;
Whence time, with its slow crucible, distils
Clear streams of history, fable, art and song.

III

Meshed in the dreams and turmoils of the past
That clutch with spidery threads, the world rolls on;
While green tomorrow glistens, tangled fast
In the long coils and nets of centuries gone.

IV

Time, like a gradual sieve, will test anew
Our friends, our deeds and dreams. The meshes hold
The pearl and sapphire and the grains of gold,
But let the iridescent foam slip through.

Across the Years

Surely, across the burying waste of years,
Though the flesh vanish, love shall still remain.
The form may alter, and the eyes and ears
No longer show the lost one close and plain;

But the deep-toned devotions of the heart
Echo within us like a ceaseless chime,
And when all quests are ended, shall be part
Of what we bear beyond the gates of time.

Doubters

Life, we may scoff, is but a meteor thing.
Behold this turtle shell, this mayfly wing.
Yet what slow eons since the Cambrian scum
To make one sceptic throat, one mocking thumb!

Gandhi

Weep not for him who flies beyond our sorrow;
Weep for the maimed and blundering world he leaves.
Less for his loss than for our shorn tomorrow
A stricken planet grieves.

His is the crown that time shall not surrender;
Weep for our world, swung in a blind man's reel.
Weep for our world, whom one so loving-tender
Never again shall heal.

Weep for a race that fells its saints and sages;
Nails down its saviors while the mad throngs gape.
Weep not for him — the sun-glow of the ages
Beams on that fragile shape.

Amid the Tempest

When truth is listing like a flood-washed sail
And all the rats are scuttling from the wreck,
Let me stand boldly on the wavering deck
And fight the tide and gale.

Not with the host that shriek, "Abandon ship!",
Grappling for spars, though all but they be lost,
But with the storm-lashed few let me be tossed
Who challenge the billows' grip.

Better to sink amid the foamy dark,
Better to fall into the sea-wolf's jaws,
Than flee the vessel, and forsake the cause
For which the brave embark.

No! when truth shudders like a flood-washed sail,
Let the squalls whip me! let the surges pound!
For if we falter; if the craft is drowned,
All the world's light shall fail.

Lilliputians

It may be, in the sight of worlds and ages,
We are no more than ants that haul a crumb,
Each man a midget warrior that engages
Enemies frailer than an infant's thumb.

Yet we must strive as though the constellations
Blaze when we triumph, falter when we lag.
Else we would drop, while chaos tore the nations,
Even the crumbs it is man's lot to drag.

Amid the Void

Boundless and measureless the reach of space
Where light-years crowd like sands, and leave no trace.
Yet the small stars, mere dust amid the void,
Give flame and splendor to the heavens' face.

Ocean Depths

Waveless, and ice-box cold, and black as doom,
And pressed beneath a load of ponderous seas,
They stretch in measureless monotonies
Where torn dark hulls are each a barnacled tomb.
And there the salt, the ageless slime consume
The fins of sharks, planks from Phoenician trees,
Irons of slavers, ingots of argosies,
In silence old as trans-galactic gloom.

Surely, the vault of loneliness and night
Is sparkless as before creation morn.
But no! a flickering ray, a lamp is borne
Between two round fish eyes, a ghostly light
Saying no gulf's too dismal, too forlorn
For life, impetuous life's all-conquering might.

Comet

Lost in the glacial silences, the blackness between the spheres,
It wanders like an errant spirit for unremembering years.
Its tail of ghostly fire hangs back from its haze-encircled head,
And it flashes a phantom signal-lamp, moon-yellow or Martian
red.

Beyond the glimmer of Saturn's rings, and the ice of Pluto's
shore,
It pierces the glooms of emptiness no eye may ever explore.
And there, in the constellated shine of a billion starry gleams
Coldly it brushes the wrecks of suns that drift on the spatial
streams.

Wreckage itself of worlds that blazed in ages sunken from
mind,
Does it bear the memory on its brow of an ancient lost man-
kind?
Its offspring the meteors scrawl the tale as they rocket across
the night
Of grandeurs and dooms and splintered globes and epochs of
faded light.

The Sun

For all our days, and all the days of man,
And half a million million days before,
This living flame has never ceased to pour
Hot radiance from the void enormous span
That stares between the worlds. And when our clan
Is less than any wind-blown drifting spore,
Tribes still unborn shall marvel, and adore
The torch-fire of the timeless artisan.

Humbly I view the common, lavish light,
Bowing in reverence to the Law and Scheme,
Knowing that even this throned and ageless might
Is but a taper where the star-clouds stream,
A glitter in the dark, a pinprick gleam
Against the billion-sunned, galactic night.

The Expanding Universe

The stars of heaven are fixed — so once we held.
But now a finger ominous and strange
Shows us the galaxies like blown dust dispelled.
The only fixity in heaven is change.

Mount Palomar

I

Walled in a lonely house upon the peak,
Plumbing the star-streams with a camera eye,
The sons of earth explore the rimless sky
And listen while the worlds and ages speak.
Deep in a blur of fire or nebulous streak
They watch the whirling suns like wind-motes fly,
And measure gulfs a billion light-years high
Where galaxies are dots, and thought grows weak.

Others may bid and grapple, scheme, debate,
Draw swords, and clash in many a shrieking clan.
But here are priests that question time and fate
In the vast pages of the starry plan,
And by the majesties they contemplate
Declare the godhood in the mind of man.

II

He in whose history light has barely time
To wing its way beyond our neighbor spheres,
Looks out across a thousand million years
To altitudes where thought alone can climb.
And he, a particle of salt and slime,
Who ranges a point in space, attunes his ears
To choirs and paeans of the worlds, and peers
Through measureless chasms of the starred sublime.

Surely, if mortal searching thus can cross
The deeps of distance and eternity,
The finite and the infinite merge as one.
And the vast surges of the cosmic force
Blend the revolving ages as they flee,
The small sky-gazer, and the super-sun.

Above the Milky Way

In universes heaven-high above the Milky Way,
Whose light that left when lizards flew may reach our eyes
today,
The plain familiar elements of our pools and peaks are
known,—
The iron of our soil and blood, the lime that builds our bone.

And if we climbed across the void on some enchanted car
To where our galaxy's billion orbs shine as one feeble star,
There in that gulf above all gulfs, what would we see
unfurled?
Perhaps a sun around whose fire rotates a green-caped world.

Perhaps a globe of flowered winds, meadows and lakes and
hills,
And one who, chiselling tower homes, suffers and breeds and
kills;
Perhaps the sparkle and song of youth, the sneer and moan
of age,
The wail of babes, the answerless "Why?" of the wrinkled
bard and sage.

The atoms are the building blocks — those that on earth we
find;
And the matrix that we know on earth may pattern the forms
of mind, —
From our streets and lawns to the systems strewn like powder
that flecks the night,
One breath, one being and one flame, one pulse, one law, one
light!

After the Atom

Deep among honeycombing caves, within the moon there
dwelt

Creatures with faces pale as frost, and bodies weak as felt.
Like hiving bees across the gloom they wove their crowded
way,
Brewing in vials their food, and light for their dim, electric
day.

Yet from the sealed pit-hollows wherein they bred and died,
Walled from the worse-than-Arctic night and furnace noon
outside,
Sometimes through lenses they would scan a golden globe that
shone,
With shadowy markings like a face, high in the starred un-
known.

And some believed, but most denied the story that was told:
“There, in a land of boundless sun, our fathers throve of old;
There, through the ages, they had raised bridges and docks
and towers,
Until they fell, slain by the wealth of their own crackling
powers.

“Secrets as wondrous as the sky, wisdom no thing of flesh
Has wit to fathom or to use, snared with a devil’s mesh;
And the blade whereby they smote the foe smote back at
them again,
Till air and earth were foul with rays deadly to beasts and
men;

“And over the wide, once-blossomy spread of that whole
poisoned sphere,
All creatures but the rat and fly were doomed to disappear.
Freely along the unpeopled street long-tailed usurpers ran,
And maggots gnawed where granaries knew no more the
tread of man.

“Yet some of our race, the tales report, outlasted those
horror-days.
On rocket wings they sought the moon, fleeing the demon
rays;
And many died, but some began a half-life caged and thin,
In which even now we expiate our fathers’ deathly sin.”

Such was the rumor some believed in those honeycombing
caves
Where things with faces pale as frost swarmed amid living
graves,
Peering through lenses at the night, where, pale and round,
would rise
A globe with shadowy lands and seas against the star-filled
skies.

III

The Universe Within

Within One Life

I

Flashbacks into the past, like pictures seen
Across a distance with mist-darkened eyes
Flickering on a weird and shifting screen,
Haunt me tonight; and crowded visions rise
Of faces fading in a haze of years,
And one white-templed, with a sunlike smile;
And a bay-windowed sharp hill-street appears,
With cable-cars that clang in single file.

I wander there adrift, like one who roams
Some ghostly habitation in the night.
Not from dead yesterday's abandoned homes
The spirit draws its nourishment and light,
But onward, through whatever shoals and straits,
To fresh adventure . . . where tomorrow waits.

II

Of all the beings whose dear shining eyes
Lighted my way when time for me was new,
Hardly a one but silently withdrew
Beyond embraces and beyond good-byes.
But in their place I saw new comrades rise,—
Friends coming and passing like a cloud review,
And love that stayed . . . till down the years there grew
A whole fresh galaxy in my changing skies.

Heaven and earth have shifted; and I peer
At the deep past as on a road I fled
Epochs ago, beneath some alien sun.
For nursed within one mothering atmosphere
Are many worlds; and many lives are led
Amid the steeps and mazes of the one.

Reminiscence

Moodily winding up a bare hill-lane
Or peering from a moonlit study room,
I felt in youth the shadow of a gloom
No ray could pierce, no current grief explain.
Vaguely it haunted, like some ancient pain,
The burden of a long-forgotten doom,
Till bit by bit I saw the years consume
The blackness as the sunlight conquers rain.

Yet even now, when some stray rhyme recalls
The spell of that old sorrow, I believe
Unknowingly I looked through clouded walls
To some dark loss that time could not retrieve,
Some earlier life from whose pale stricken halls
A wandering ghost returned to bid me grieve.

In the Garden

Watching the torrent from the nozzle splash
Across the colored blooms in rainbow spray,
I am transported, in a stabbing flash,
Back to a garden half a life away.

Even as then, the marigold and rose
Blaze in parade; impetuous bees streak near.
But all beside is changed; not one of those
Who filled that earlier world accosts me here.

Love, with her lyric eyes and lips, has come;
Tumult and grief, as on a moving screen,
From cities loud with traffic's beat and hum
To canyons cloistral with the redwood green.

And yet this garden, like that faded one,
Is fair in tasseled blue and silky gold, —
Unaging flower-light, ageless wind and sun,
While only man looks back, and waxes old.

Old Home

Never again, perhaps, we shall re-enter
That house where once we labored, laughed and dreamed,
Dim rooms that were our life's retreat and center,
Where warmly the redwood-filtered sunlight beamed.

There through the years old friends have congregated
By lamp and moon-glow and the firelit cheer,
Till their fond presence almost has created
Its own benign and loving atmosphere.

More than the walks of daisy, rose and aster,
More than the maple grove, the huge green bay,
More than the cottage frame of wood and plaster
Is given to them who tread our paths today.

Part of our life, too deep for time's dispelling,
Ghost-like remains behind that ivied door,
While we look skyward from a later dwelling
To see the sun on hills unviewed before.

When I Have Left These Hills

When I have left these hills I loved and roamed
To pass beyond the dusk, may I have won
More than applause in temples gaudy-domed,
Where bubble names are blazoned like the sun.
May I recall that I have built; have made
Some shoot the greener, or some lens more clear;
Have checked the reddening of some hand or blade,
Or rose with laughter over loss or fear.

May some great tree that unobserved I sowed
Smile in its April bridal; may some mind
Glitter more keenly that I marked the road,
Though I be covered by the fog behind.
May I be one, when I must seek the Void,
Who lighted lamps, with no old hearth destroyed!

Cycle

Thousands of times and thousands of times we turned from
a lighted room
To find our rest with wandering dreams in a still and
sheeted gloom.
Thousands of times, and thousands of times, out of the dark
we rose
To heavens pale with peachbud fire, after our charmed repose.

And what if we quench a greater lamp and a longer
dusk descends?
Shall the dawn not glow in banded red when guardian
slumber ends?
Thousands of times, and thousands of times, O my love of
Now and Here,
May we watch, although in other skies, the night-fogs
disappear!

Beyond Language

Love is a speech no pupil need rehearse.
We learn it from the breast at which we nurse.
The dog that licks its master's hand proclaims
The oldest language of the universe.

Twilight

Threading the bare gray twilight under a bare gray sky,
While bare gray hills surmount me and bare gray clouds
 go by,
It seems I could roam forever over lanes of dusk and peace,
Finding the brawls of nations wind-echoes that fade
 and cease.

Buoyantly through the dimness, silently forth and forth,
Where glitters no goal or beacon, no south or east or north,
Where time is a lost dimension, and space has no measure
 or mark,
Effortless as a feather, I could glide between day and dark.

A spell like a half recollection, a promise of marvels to be,
From the haunted dusk for a moment has spoken
 in music to me,
As though in a gray world of beauty when tumult and
 passion are done,
I'll wander in freedom from meshes of moonlight and
 starlight and sun.

Retrospect

What was the name they gave me? What was my creed and
race?

When did my eyelids open? And what was my dwelling-
place?

Where the sands of Egypt glittered, or the plains of Persia
rolled,

Or in brawling marts of Bagdad, where men were bought
and sold?

Did I flash in rose and purple? or bluster, a clanking lord,
Where the moated fort was battered by squadrons with pitch
and sword?

Did I heave on the groaning galley, or gasp in the silver mine,
Or mutter, a priest of Moloch, under a smoking shrine?

Did I sail with Aegean pirates to the ports of fabled blue,
Or drive at the shrinking Incas with Pizarro's crimson crew?
Did I sculpture a bust of Pallas, or chant with the
troubadours,

Or, a beggar with a rice-bowl, grope on Bengali shores?

Whose are the arms that held me? And whose the lips
and eyes

That called like a song at evening, and bounded my earth
and skies?

I dream, and the shadows deepen. And echoes and ghosts
are rife

To murmur of loves forgotten, and lives before this life.

Invisible Universe

At times by night we glimpse it, when in a latticed sky
The moon above the pine-tops is a bright, cloud-haloed eye;
At times by day in meadows where clover is rippling green
And the wind among the poppies goes scented from worlds
unseen.

At times with lids close-fastened against a twilight pane,
We follow it in the storm-wrack, the arrowy charge of rain.
At times, in summer musings, when space and change
withdraw,
We peer at isles and oceans no flesh-eye ever saw.

Sparkles that daze and pass us! glints of a shrouded verge
As when, from hidden planets, mysterious flames emerge!
Inklings of grace and glory! stabs of ethereal light
From summits beyond our hearing, beyond our touch
and sight.

Vague in the dusk, a universe that mantles our own like air,
Until to the lonely mind it dawns with a starlike signal-flare.
At times by day we see it, at times by night in dreams,
And, when it glimmers, form and flesh are one with That
Which Seems.

Beyond Sight

But for the rippling green upon the hill,
Blown cloud, and leaves that never will be still,
I could not know, because I could not see,
That such a sovereign as the wind could be.

But for its fruit: the light within the heart,
Daisies and stars, music and love and art,
I could not guess, because I could not trace,
The invisible Wisdom moulding time and space.

In Soft and Gentle Things

What power lies in soft and gentle things!
The storm-waves kin to mist that rings the moon;
And the light air, that lane for sparrows' wings,
The thundering substance of the black typhoon!

Makers of Song

I

How many millions, questing for bread or wine,
Wrangling and grappling for a crown or fee,
Labor and love, with shouts of "My!" and "Mine!",
Swagger and boast, and rear their progeny,
And drift from view, and leave no other sign
Than does a sea-shell flung into the sea.
But these are mostly common, grubbing souls,
Earth-bound as worms, and practical as moles.

Then, comet-strange above the weltering throng,
Alien to all the clans that flame and fight,
Rises a Mozart with his wizard song,
One in a myriad; and time halts her flight,
And in a spell that lingers century-long,
Men pant, and glow, and marvel, and delight.
Yet he is but a straying brother we deem
Tied to the stars, impractical as a dream.

II

He sought to move the currents of his time,
Which splashed unchanged against its reefs and piers.
But by the pulse of his impassioned rhyme,
He moved the heartstrings of a thousand years.

III

The drift of centuries lies mounded deep
Over the bones of Dante, Milton, Blake.
No wind recalls where Virgil's embers sleep;
And where Lorenzo lies, no echoes wake.

But these, though only ghosts that roam the night,
Shine in the witch-fire of their deeds, and give
A scarcely dwindled radiance, a light
More keenly alive than most of us who live.

IV

Frail rainbow-searchers, often they were deemed
Spinners of gossamer, who weakly dreamed.
Yet they have spread, with their small wicks of rhyme,
Bridges of light across the seas of time.

V

Within the few lines of a quivering song
More stormy conflagrations may be veiled
Than Timùr saw when his red horde assailed
Some smoke-filled city in a screeching throng.

And in one epic of fierce flags unfurled
And Caesars splashing through the blood of kings,
There may be wilder power from deeper springs
Than Caesar used to subjugate the world.

VI

Surely the gauge and glory of the singer
Is not the strutting when the hall is packed.
Who would not fill his lungs as music-bringer
When cheers and *bravos* hail his faintest act?

But when the aisles are cold, the chairs forsaken,
Still, still to stand, and blow the flute or horn! —
Here is the iron test so few have taken
That shows the crownless king, the artist born.

VII

If I were a flutist and found the concert hall forsaken,
With only a few in the wide and staring rows,
Still I would stand and play, and keep my faith unshaken
That music was more than a wind that wails and goes.

But being a maker of song when crownless and scorned
 is the singer,
What shall I do to startle the silent aisles?
The lamp still burns, though unregarded the lantern-bringer
And feeble the wick over solitary miles.

The poppy still burns, though its petals fall by the way
 unnoted;
From the lonely thrush in the wood a melody pours.
And I am a lover of song, to song I am pledged and devoted
Though the bard like a beggar beat against closing doors.

On an Old Anthology of Verse

Across the fogging years, who can recall
Nathaniel Cutter or Patricia Bright?
Their poems, like rich-tinted leaves of fall,
Colored a page, then ghost-like fled from sight.
Who moans at Portia Tyndale's wounded heart,
Or threads hill-pastures with Ezekiel Snow,
Or, awestruck, throbs at Homer Neely's art? —
These all have sung and ceased so long ago!

One in a constellation, starry clear
While all his old companions dim and die,
Lingers, and gathers light from year to year,
Till written less in books than on the sky.
How many torches lit and lost to make
The lamp of one remembered Burns or Blake!

Poems for Music

I

SYMPHONY CONCERT

This I shall never know:
Whence rises this tumult like all time that cries,
This shouting like all clamorous winds that blow,
This call as of the rivers and the skies, —
This dreaming of brooks and fields
And massed commotion as of swords and shields
Crashing in combat; murmurings in the hush
Of sunset; meditations with the trees;
And the white avalanche whose thunder-rush
Drones of the destinies;
The psalm of groves, and melody of flowers
Brightening into bloom; a wood-bird's song;
The flocking of clouds and slap-and-dash of showers,
And laughing and praying and sighing of the throng.
This I shall never know:
Whence pours this storming and kingliness of sound,
Deep-bosomed and long-resonant and profound,
But as from holy ground
I hear the worlds exclaim, and watch the ages flow.

"HEARING THE SURGE AND BEAT AND SOB"

Hearing the surge and beat and sob of music rolling crest
on crest,
I touch a current of majesty kindling to song
within my breast.
I mark a sweet and wordless tongue that murmurs its tales
from heart to heart,
And pulse in tune with a mighty whole whereof
I am a living part.

Passions that shun the telling lips, longings that mock the
ears of day,
Triumphs and dooms and ecstasies merge in that vast
symphonic play.
And while the billowing measures break, regather and blend
and overflow,
I feel that man is greater than earth, and life is grander
than we know.

III

ON A VIOLIN CONCERTO

Why should it bring remembrance of a music
Heard in a dim, remotest childhood dream,
When out of paradise, angelic players
Sounded a holy theme?

Those long thin plaintive strains, a spirit pleading;
Then waves of rolling harmony that soars
In crest on turbulent crest, like beauty beating
At everlasting shores!

The far dream-rapture and the living glory,
Like one symphonic splendor, meet and merge.
And time has vanished, and the listener hovers
At some immortal verge.

The violin, the player, and the score
Are not the fount from which the music springs.
But from some realm beyond the clasp of Things
The swelling, bursting, luminous numbers pour.

The violin, the player, and the score
Are but the mouthpiece of the melodies,
The oracles of ultimate verities,
Heard only in the notes that blend and soar.

IV

THE GREAT RECORDING

They who, a hundred years ago, created
Great chants and symphonies, could not foretell
Their living raptures would be propagated
By disks repeating, in a fairy spell,
The tones of violin, cello, flute and bell.

Nor could they know how, on the waves of distance,
Orchestral notes would travel, lightning-swift,
A country's length not offering more resistance
Than half a stone's throw, and their sweep and lift
Heard in all homes that prized the wizard gift.

And what if thus some God-inspired recording
Preserves our deeds and dreams and ecstasy,
That in time's reappraisal and rewarding
The best of all we were or sought to be
Shall sing in the hearing of eternity?

V

BROADCAST

Soul without body! neither flesh nor form;
Nothing a hand could touch, or eye could sight.
Yet pouring out of silence, comes the storm
Of all life's wonder, glory, grief and light.

VI

ON SOME RECORDED MUSIC

These small queer markings meaningless to the eye,
Stamped on a whirling dial, contain the keys
To grief and love, immortal melodies,
The organ's tumult and the violin's cry.
Here time is crystallized; and years gone by,
Held in these vibrant choirs and symphonies,
Merge with the living Now; and memories
Are kindled in a fire that cannot die.

And since the song remains while singers go,
Sometimes I wonder if life's nobler part,
Its inspirations and divinest gleams,
May blend in some great oratorio
By which the universe, with age-long art,
Records the music of man's quest and dreams.

Ancestors

Obscure as sleepers in old Theban biers
Are they of centuries past, from whom I sprang.
Some may have charged amid the flash and clang
Of lances — plumed and helmeted cavaliers;
And some have burned the attic oil of seers,
Some crouched in ambush, when gray castles rang
With screams of "Robber!", some been left to hang
For crows to peck at, some with tingling ears
Fiddled to minstrel airs, some swung and bent
Above the groaning hoe for seigneurs' bread,
Some preached, some perished writhing at the stake.
But all have gone without a monument, —
Merged with the myriad, anonymous dead
Who labored, suffered and died for all men's sake.

History

Think of the millions that have striven and died
In Rome, in Carthage, Babylon, and Spain,
That herded their flocks, and reaped and sowed their grain,
And reared their sons, and then in dread or pride,
Like armies vanquished, tottered and stepped aside.
Think of the hosts in Artaxerxes' reign,
Where Sargon marched, or on the Syrian plain,
On desert or steppe, who bred and multiplied!

Myriads countless as the motes that climb
For one bright moment in a shaft of sun,
Till the cloud-shadows drown them out of view;
While we, upon our razor-edge of time,
Avidly weave again the webs they spun,
And, grappling and grabbing, wind on paths they knew.

On a History Professor

The owl-eyed bearded face has long ago
Receded to his loved domain, the past.
Yet still I hear his speech, a living blast,
Burst like a storm on students packed below.
His oaken frame, caught in the spurt and flow
Of his own fire, sways like a gale-whipped mast.
And staring youth is spellbound or aghast
At Tarquin's doom or Mithridates' woe.

Safe over all the cloud-caps of the years,
The eloquent manner glitters like a flame;
But the wise substance now is less than spray.
Strangely, the dinned assurance floods my ears
Of a great presence and a mighty aim,
Though what his words I can no longer say.

The Hands of the Dead

Out of the shadows and the mist and mould
They reach for us who once, in love or pain,
They clasped or clung to; and they still retain
The flint or silken ways we knew of old.
One, by a waspish will, may seek to hold
Sisters or children in a honeyed chain;
And one will lie, as often it has lain,
With us in kindness easier felt than told.

Out of the valley where the gray fogs glower,
Those hands are stretching over forts and homes.
We see the hill they charred, the grove in flower,
The Troy they ravaged, and long-planted Romes;
While fleshless fingers dig, with living power,
The deep foundations for tomorrow's domes.

IV

Anniversary

Anniversary

(To My Father)

As when in childhood I would strain to hear,
Out of the night, your quick approaching stride,
So now I bend an ear
Into a darkness far more deep and wide
Wherein last year
You vanished like a thought. But now no sound
Steals from those shades outreaching time and space.
I search a silence all the more profound
To one who scans its face,
And read, as in that hour when first I heard
That you had hidden beyond view or reach,
The mighty "Why?" for which no answering word
May come but in the mind's own tongueless speech.
Over me once again the sorrow flows
That I had fancied was interred year-deep.
And pain that seemed to sleep
Wakes all the fiercer for its false repose,
And I am stricken anew by fate and change
And time and weirdness and mortality,
Monarchs as vast and strange
As to the babe the storm-wind and the sea.

But this alone is certain: you have passed
Beyond our sight, beyond our touch and call,
And though it may befall
That our free spirits will be joined at last,
Still of the warm and laughing voice we knew,
And of those kind gray eyes that spoke and shone,
Only a memory lives, and not a clue
But in faith's misted gaze, to where you roam.
So when, as in those far-off childhood years,
I used to listen, lying abed at home,
For your returning step, while ghostly fears
Flocked to my mind, today I still look out
Through silence and shadow, sleeplessness and doubt,

For one who comes not. But as then my dread
Was but a figment, dying before the night,
When in the end your never-failing tread
Rang out, and I would view the dim hall-light,
May not the hour arrive
When I shall see, across a greater dark,
Your figure beckon, luminously alive,
Lit by the old and unextinguished spark
That made the *you*, while wordlessly you say
On some night-vigil you were called away
And now come back, come back, for soon it will be day?

The Stranger

Unhelped, he tottered forth, and picked a place
Deep in the waiting bus — hollowed and thin,
With short, pain-taken steps and leathery skin,
His withered frame matching his lagging pace.
Scanning that long, worn, suffering, gentle face,
I suddenly pictured one who late had been
Gray as this stranger; and they seemed akin,
Though *he* was lost beyond our power to trace.

Little could that withdrawn old man have guessed
The torment of him who watched him come and go;
Nor how solicitous thoughts, like angels, blessed
His footsteps where he staggered, stooped and slow;
And how fresh sorrow, cutting as whips, oppressed
A heart still wounded from a recent blow.

In the Crucible

They all shall join the legendary past,
These episodes that bear us down today.
The good, as in a haunted myth, shall last,
And all that irked and stung shall melt away.

Far, far and pale the tempest-bursts shall seem,
The glare and shadow like a story told.
For life is half a recollected dream
Made from the dross of time that turns to gold.

Mourners

The shadows close, I sometimes half believe,
Not on the wanderer faring out and on,
But only on them who stay behind to grieve,
And see the sunset mist, but not the dawn.

The Eternal Flux

Outside, the world is changeless. Sun and rain,
Snow-wind and frost pursue their ancient plan.
Only within the universe of man
Time, like a hunter, counts his quarries slain.
Only in fond remembrance I regain
Glimpses of one the dark and silence ban,
Who through all seasons, since my life began,
Smiled with affectionate fire, and calmed my pain.

Rose-breasted May and russet fall have gone
Five times since he has left; and as of old
Come winter squalls and showers. Why is it then
Man's world is altered and his heart is torn,
While the far-searching mind alone can hold
Faces and scenes that flee the sight of men?

Revenant

The dead, you say, do not return. And yet,
Plain as in life, I looked on him last night:
The tall, spare form I never shall forget;
Gray eyes that scanned me with a grave, calm light.
Clasped in a dream, down some strange nebulous street
I strolled, and suddenly heard a voice that cried,
"Here comes your father!"; and I turned to greet
One whom the mists of six long winters hide.

The years had blown away! As real, as clear
As ever when his living hand took mine!
I called his name; I saw him earnestly peer
Into my eyes; then, with no word or sign,
He melted from view; and, startled, I awoke,
Like one who'd bridged the past and lost its yoke.

A Fog Was Blowing

A fog was blowing across the world, and a fog
was in his eyes,
But he smiled in the gray and fading light, nor heeded the
watchers' sighs.

"Free! free! eerily free! free as an ocean bird!" —
They saw a flutter of dying lips, but gay was the song
they heard. —

"Loosed from the dust and trash of earth, I shall make
a cloud my home;
I shall voyage the seas of twilight mist, and cruise
with the flying foam.
I shall haunt the vapors that witch-like weave high on the
mountain's breast;
Float like a shadow through the woods; and surge
to the thunder crest.
I shall rocket in sport on the clockless lanes that wind
among the stars,
Swift as a hope, and winged with the might of gods
and avatars;
And they, the comrades from of old, timeless as
rivers flowing,
Shall glimmer in silence at my side, with great eyes
round and glowing;
And people that gather far below, when we flicker
on the blast,
Shall shudder, and cross themselves, and say, "What
weirdness, what ghost goes past?"
A fog was blowing across the world, and a fog was in his eyes,
But he smiled in the gray and fading light, nor heeded
the watchers' cries.
"Free! free! eerily free! free as an ocean bird!" —
They saw a flutter of dying lips, but gay was the song
they heard.

Sleep

This bridge from dark to light,
Which all must travel and yet none behold,
Vaults an abysmal night
Whose weird, unfathomable fogs unfold
To distances untold.

Only by furtive gleams,
Strange as the signals from some shrouded star,
Beneath the mask of dreams
We pierce those realms with flickers so bizarre
We know not what they are.

Helpless and blind and bound,
Across mysterious vacancies we glide,
Where silence lies profound;
Then to the sunlight of the further side,
Follow some speechless guide;

And vaguely touch that land
Of phantoms which all men at last must find,
Nor guess the bridge has spanned
Shadowy oceans where each night we wind
To shores beyond mankind.

The Departed

We see them in our dreams, and when the dawn turns gray
They vanish like a mood, a star-mist in the night.
We meet in close embrace, we hear their voices say
Things never told on earth of longing and delight.

We see them in our dreams; and though the past be deep
With dim oblivious years when they lay underground,
We hold their arms in love, we walk with them and weep,
And never once recall a green old fallen mound.

We see them in our dreams, but after day shines clear
They still remain, remain, fair as in Junes before, —
A sense of lips and eyes, and presences pulsing near,
And friends who had been away, and again had passed
our door.

From Ports Beyond

If ever, from the ports beyond exploring,
Friends we have lost, the loving dead, return,
It must be when harmonious notes are pouring
Where lingering twilights burn.

Charmed by the throb of soft or plaintive measures,
Lulled to remembrance in a haunted glow,
They think of vanished faces, glooms and pleasures,
And loves they used to know.

Deaf to our voices and our spirits calling,
They come again, a shy invisible throng.
To peals of music, and the slow night falling,
They brush our lips in song.



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